

Although Simmons appeared to have the state Democratic machine under his control, the Democratic leaders of Wilmington most likely worked independently of Simmons, using his tactics and connections to their benefit. According to Thomas Clawson, editor of the *Wilmington Messenger*, “for a period of six to twelve months prior to November 10, 1898, the white citizens of Wilmington prepared quietly but effectively for the day when action would be necessary.”¹⁵ How effective and well organized this and other clandestine organizations were is debatable since many of the overt actions attributed to the groups are found in newspapers and accounts and reflect the overarching themes and characteristics of the statewide campaign. No doubt leading white men determined to win the election worked together to lend a distinctive cast to the Democratic campaign in the city, but it must be remembered that various members of these “secret” groups were also well-known and visible leaders of the county Democratic Party.¹⁶

¹⁵ Cowan of the *Dispatch* also echoed Clawson’s claims that the citizens had planned the coup for up to a year prior to the 1898 election. Thomas W. Clawson, “The Wilmington Race Riot in 1898, Recollections and Memories,” n.d., Louis T. Moore Papers, State Archives, Office of Archives and History, Raleigh; Cowan, “The Wilmington Race Riot.”

¹⁶ Much attention has been paid to the activities of a group of white leaders known as the Secret Nine and their conspiracy to return the city to Democratic Party control. Using recollections of participants and observers, local chronicler Harry Hayden described the actions of the Secret Nine in his history of the Wilmington Light Infantry and *The Story of the Wilmington Rebellion*. Historians have followed his lead. Under close scrutiny, many of the writers who have discussed the actions of the city’s white leaders have described the same men performing many of the same actions but with different perspectives based in the writer’s bias or perspective. Hayden’s timelines fall apart when scrutinized, particularly regarding some of the pre-election scheming of the Secret Nine.

The “Secret Nine” as defined by Hayden was composed of a group of men who met first at the home of Hugh MacRae and then regularly at the home of Walter L. Parsley. The nine were Hugh MacRae, William A. Johnson, Walter L. Parsley, J. Allan Taylor, L. B. Sasser, Pierre B. Manning, Hardy L. Fennell, William Gilchrist, and Edward S. Lathrop. At their meetings, the men developed a citywide campaign that dovetailed with Furnifold Simmons’ statewide white supremacy movement. In addition to their plans to establish protection for the city’s white women and children in the event of unrest, they understood that they were also planning a “revolt” to overthrow city government. Even as the Secret Nine planned their activities, another group of men, called “Group Six” by Hayden, met at the home of another prominent Wilmington leader, William L. Smith. The other members of Group Six were Colonel Walker Taylor, Henry G. Fennell, Thomas D. Meares, John Beery, and William F. Robertson. These two groups of men shared multiple business and family connections. For example, the Taylor and Fennell families had members in both organizations. Walker Taylor was a member of the Democratic Party County Campaign Committee and leader of the state’s regional guard unit. Further, the groups worked with Democratic Party

It must be acknowledged that the men of Hayden’s Secret Nine and Group Six were also visible leaders who very well could have merged their social and political agendas, using all of the tools at their disposal. There is no doubt that a central group of men managed the Democratic campaign and planned the ensuing *coup d’etat*. Such organization of so many disparate groups could not have taken place without the firm control of a group of close-knit, well-placed individuals. Historian Helen Edmonds acknowledged that “a certain element of preparation stood out in the activities which preceded the riot indicating strongly that” there was a degree of conspiracy and preparation. Edmonds, *Negro and Fusion Politics*, 166.